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ABSTRACT

The comprehensiveness and effectiveness of school-to-work transition activities are limited by staff and time. The unique and complicated counseling needs of students with disabilities require the involvement of other actors, primarily parents. Youth with disabilities and their parents must be knowledgeable about vocational opportunities and program requirements as well as community services and other benefits available to them by law. Federal legislation that has mandated certain policies to ensure transition assistance for students with disabilities includes the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act. Other legislation delineates parental involvement at various points during transition. Multidisciplinary transition planning teams--whose core members include parent(s) or guardian, teacher, student, and a staff member appointed to coordinate the transition planning process--are one way of bringing parents into the mainstream of the transition process. Parents can support their children's transitions by organizing to ensure political pressure and compliance with the law, monitoring employers' hiring practices, ensuring access to public accommodations, and filing formal complaints. Collaborative consultation is effective in solving problems parents and students encounter in making school and work transitions. In this arrangement, teachers and parents are co-equals recognizing the expertise each brings to the planning. (YLB)

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Parents and the School-to-Work Transition of Special Needs Youth

by Bettina A. Lankard

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The school-to-work transition of the nation's youth has been a major focus of vocational education efforts for the past decade. Educators help students identify their interests and abilities, engage in career education and career development activities, and develop individual education plans. Although these activities are significant, their comprehensiveness and effectiveness are limited by staff and time. "The ratio of students to counselors in public high schools is almost 300 to 1; and school guidance counselors are able to spend less than one hour of every five on career counseling" (Otto 1989, p. 161). Add to this the unique and complicated counseling needs of students with disabilities and it becomes apparent that other actors, primarily parents, must be included in the school-to-work transition of youth.

Will defines transition as "an outcome-oriented process encompassing a broad array of services and experiences that lead to employment" (Friedenberg et al. 1993, p. 235). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 defines transition services as "a coordinated set of activities for a student, designed within an outcome-oriented process, which promotes movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation" (ibid.). This ***ERIC Digest*** looks at the challenges of effecting successful transitions, particularly for students with disabilities, and parents' roles in the transition process.

Conditions that Necessitate Transition Services

Part of the dilemma faced by students at the turn of this century is the changing occupational scene: countless occupational possibilities and a wide variety of career preparation options. Students, educators, and parents have difficulty keeping abreast of new and emerging occupations as well as those that have become obsolete. For students with disabilities, the challenge of career selection and work preparation is even greater. These youth and their parents must be knowledgeable about vocational opportunities and program requirements as well as the community services and other benefits available to them by law.

Laws that Mandate Transition Assistance

Federal legislation has mandated certain policies to ensure transition assistance for students with disabilities. The IDEA promotes the development of the "Individualized Transition Plan for students 14 years of age and older, which focuses on community-referenced learning, to help prepare students for adult roles in their communities" (Smith and Lauritzen 1992-93, p. 16). The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) applies "'a new access doctrine' to all aspects of the lives of individuals with disabilities, not just the school years" (ibid.). This act represents a commitment to students with disabilities to provide for them "the fullest opportunity, and support to fulfill the typical roles in society." Although these laws provide direction, all stakeholders in the education of students with disabilities must be knowledgeable about them, monitoring their interpretation and implementation in the community.

Parents' Desire for Involvement

Other legislation delineates parental involvement at various points during transition: P.L. 94-142, which "mandates that assessment information be gathered from a variety of sources, including parents" (ibid., p. 140) and P.L. 98-524, which "requires provision of counseling services designed to facilitate transitions from school to post-school employment and career opportunities" (ibid., p. 141). Research shows, however, that parents have little involvement in transition planning, despite the fact that they have a critical role to play and a major interest in assuming that role (McNair and Rusch 1990). A survey of 200 families of students with disabilities found that parents were significantly less involved in transition programs than they desired (ibid., p. 10):

- Nearly 70 percent desired involvement, whereas slightly more than 30 percent experienced involvement.
- Significantly more parents desired to have an equal part in decision making than were given the opportunity.
- Although 12 percent indicated no involvement experience with the transition team, less than 2 percent indicated that they desired no involvement.
- Parents wanted to be involved in finding job placements and community living arrangements more often than they had the opportunity to do so.

"Lack of parent participation and involvement may be detrimental to the achievement of successful transition outcomes" (Johnson and Rusch 1993, p. 6).

Multidisciplinary Teams for Transition Planning

It appears that many parents are left out of the transition planning process for their children with disabilities. Multidisciplinary transition planning teams—whose core members include parent(s) or guardian, along with the teacher, student, and a staff member appointed to coordinate the transition planning process—are one way of bringing parents into the mainstream of the transition process (O'Neill et al. 1990). The benefit of having parents serve on interdisciplinary teams is that they can help teachers pinpoint the specific skills needed by their children. They can also offer their perspectives on the effectiveness of the delivery system given their experience with it. The testimony of parents and consumers regarding benefits and pitfalls of the system provide valuable insight to parents with less experience and to other members of the team. Izzo and Shumate (1991) cite the following rationale for involving parents in the transition process:

- Parents know their children better than anyone else, thus they can serve as critical resources in planning.
- Parents can be extremely effective in maintaining continuity of training and of purpose.

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- Parents can act as system advocates, often facilitating changes professionals desire but are constrained to accomplish.
- Parents can act as role models/teachers, instilling positive learning that makes job success for their children more likely.
- Parents can act as community supporters and messengers to the community about positive agency efforts.
- Parents can act as service coordinators, thus ensuring more effective and positive results.
- Parents as nurturers/caretakers provide support and encouragement that complement professional efforts.

Interagency teams empower parents to stay involved by providing them with leadership training and encouraging them to share what they have learned with other parents. Everson et al. (1992) found that interagency teams that included parents as decision makers and co-members were "more effective in stimulating service delivery change at the individual, local, regional, and state levels" (p. 48).

Some of the activities in which parents can engage to support their children's transitions include organizing to ensure political pressure and compliance with the law, sharing information on the ADA, monitoring the hiring practices of employers, ensuring access to public accommodations, and filing formal complaints if necessary (Smith and Lauritzen 1992-93). Parents should also be active in collaborating on school curriculum to ensure that their children will have appropriate options available to them when they leave school. O'Neill et al. (1990) present the following recommendations:

1. Parents should share information with school personnel about student and family needs, activities, and goals.
2. Parents should participate in selecting goals, the kinds of learning experiences their children will have, and the kinds of skills they will be taught.
3. Parents should participate with school personnel in exploring post-school options.
4. Parents may need to work with professionals and/or other parents to develop more appropriate options when service gaps exist.

Collaborative Consultation for Problem Solving

Although transition planning is enhanced by the combined efforts of a multidisciplinary and interagency teams, collaborative consultation is effective in solving problems parents and students encounter in making school and work transitions. Collaborative consultation is a "model in which the teacher-consultant and the parent-consultee cooperatively solve problems through their shared expertise" (Elksnin and Elksnin 1990, p. 2). In the collaborative consultation arrangement, teachers and parents are co-equals recognizing the expertise each brings to the planning. "Opportunities for implementing collaboration include consultation sessions designed to inform parents of vocational opportunities, plan vocational assessment and collect vocationally-relevant information, develop the vocational component of the individualized education plan, and develop plans for transitions from school to employment or post-secondary training" (ibid.). The collaborative consultation process can help teachers and parents meet the mandates of P.L. 94-142 and P.L. 98-524.

Motivation is the key factor driving parents to become involved in the school-to-work transitions of their children with disabilities. The intense desire many parents share–to help their children succeed in school, work, and community living–is a powerful force prompting them to develop the skills they need to coordinate programs and services for their children. Through a variety of interactions with the many individuals involved in transitions, parents have the potential to serve as a primary force in coordinating the activities involved in effecting successful school-to-work transition.

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